 St Benedict South-West 

**“Prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ”**

We find it hard to pray. If we always found it a deep, rich experience we would do it more often. The fact is that people often experience it as dry and unrewarding. Why is this?

Perhaps the answer lies in our image of God. The Sistine Chapel, wonderful though it is, probably doesn’t help. The most famous image in Western art, the majestic and powerful bearded God, reaching out to Adam with his outstretched finger, has fixed an image in our minds of God as a Being. Even Jesus spoke of his Father, which is deeply meaningful, but also tends to fix a certain image of God in our minds.

But, as Aquinas reminds us, a proper understanding is that God is not *a* Being, but rather the source of all Being - the very act of Being itself. He is not ‘of’ the Universe at all, but acts with it, and in it, and through it. This makes God unknowable, because we gain our knowledge of everything through our five senses, which, with the aid of huge radio telescopes, can even scan the far reaches of the universe - but the five senses cannot be aware of something which is not of the universe at all.

Even our imagination is limited by what the five senses can feed it. Even when we imagine things which do not exist in the universe, mythical beasts and the like, they are always comprised of things that do exist – claws of a lion, tail of a lizard, wings of a bat. Can you think of anything that you have imagined which has no reference point in the world of our experiences?

This means that God is always beyond our knowledge. Whatever you think God is, that’s what God is not. Frustrating, isn’t it? It is also why prayer can seem so difficult and dry - we come at it with the wrong expectations. We cannot get rid of the idea of God as a being, and that, as a being, he should respond to us and make himself known in some way.

So are we stuck, always feeling the absence of God, like walking into a room that someone has just left?

No - the great truth of which we must continually remind ourselves is the Incarnation. God, who is not a being within his own creation, nevertheless entered into his creation as one of us. For the first time in the history of the world, that great unknowable ‘other’ that we call God became knowable through his Son. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God.

Has the Church in recent years always helped us to see things in this way?

There have been many attempts to produce a new kind of Christianity over the last sixty years or so, one which is more acceptable to other cultures and religions. The hope is that this will encourage interfaith dialogue, and that we will discover the truth that all great religions have at their heart. A kind of religious humanism might evolve, by which we will all be brought together in a spirit of love and compassion.

That’s the idea, anyway – but then we find that other religions and cultures are less willing to compromise, and in order to press on with the dream we end up watering our own faith down, in an effort to be nice. The result is what Bishop Barron calls ‘beige catholicism’, inoffensive but bland, and increasingly meaningless. As for the claim that Christ is our unique saviour – “I am the way, the truth and the life – no one comes to the Father except through me” – many Christians feel positively embarrassed by such words, and quietly wish they had never been said.

Churches built since the 1960s emphasise this new approach – everything is centred around the altar as a communal table – God is present as a result of the community coming together, with the implication that an empty church is just another building, waiting for the people to come and bring it to life. The Blessed Sacrament may be relegated to a side chapel, or even just a cupboard in a side room, so as not to distract us from the new vision – the church as a place for the people to come together. A fellowship hall, not the dwelling place of God.

St Benedict has a very different vision – ‘Prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ’, he says in his Rule. If Christ is the visible image of the invisible God, then he is the only view we will have of the Father, at least this side of death, and so we relegate him at our peril.

Faith is about entering into full relationship with Christ, who by the power of the Holy Spirit will bring us into union with the Father. How do we enter more deeply into this relationship? By engaging with the life of the Church, by receiving the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist – the source and summit of the Christian life. But how do we do these things in a more intentional, deeper way? The answer is through prayer - prayer centred on the words and actions of Jesus.

The whole point of God becoming incarnate, entering his creation as one of us, was to focus our hearts and minds on Jesus, and through loving Him, to be brought to the Father. All that we know about Jesus is rooted in the Scriptures, and so if prayer is about developing a relationship with Him, we can make scripture a powerful source of our prayer.

Prayer which uses scripture as the object of the attention is called *lectio divina*, roughly translated as sacred reading. It is particularly associated with the Benedictine tradition, and has been successfully used by monks for hundreds of years in their journey towards God. But it is not a kind of prayer reserved solely for monks in the cloister – it is particularly suited to those leading busy lives in the outside world. It is a way of having the words of Christ constantly in our minds and hearts, thereby achieving St Paul’s exhortation to ‘pray without ceasing’.

The practice of *lectio divina* will put Christ at the centre of your life, and help you to enter more deeply into the sacramental life of the Church. Over the next few months we hope to introduce you to the practice of this way of prayer, so that slow, prayerful reading of Scripture becomes a habit, a habit which takes away the feeling that God is absent, and reminds us of the ever-presence of Christ.

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